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Raccoon

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# MARSH RACCOON CONTROL

by

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## Introduction

Occasionally the marsh raccoon Procyon lotor maritimus becomes abundant enough on muskrat marshes to be a nuisance. It will eat muskrats caught in traps and to a limited degree will prey directly on live muskrats in and out of muskrat houses.

When in the period from 1947 to 1950 raccoons became very abundant in the marshes from Bay View Beach to Port Mahon, most trappers and marsh owners felt that control measures were necessary.

In June 1949, just before the peak of raccoon abundance, the Delaware Board of Game and Fish Commissioners authorized a long term investigation to study methods of sustaining and improving the muskrat industry in Delaware. Of the jobs assigned to this project, one studied the marsh raccoon as a competitor of the muskrat and a second investigated the practicality of raccoon control to increase muskrat yields on Delaware marshes.

The conclusions reached by the first study were that muskrat population declines are periodic and widespread over the principal range of this animal. Evidence of the latest decline in Delaware preceded the rapid increase of raccoon by three or four years. Muskrat population declines and increases occurred to a similar degree on marshes having abundant raccoons and on those that did not.

Although the recent raccoon infestation has been markedly reduced by natural causes, probably disease, it is logical to assume that new outbreaks will occur in the future. When these outbreaks begin, control of raccoons may be helpful. Such control probably would not reduce the basic breeding populations of raccoons or materially affect major periodic fluctuations in muskrat populations, but it would lessen the direct competition between raccoons and trappers for the annual winter muskrat harvest.

The findings of the second study, the practicality of raccoon control to increase muskrat yields, are the subject of this report.

## Procedure

This study was conducted at Cedar Swamp, near Taylors Bridge, from September 1949 through June 1950. From fifteen to twenty Havahart box traps #3 were operated with various fish, meat, fruit, and vegetable baits in the marsh and on the marsh border. Beginning in October 1949, from two to three dozen #2 Victor double spring steel traps were operated. These were hidden sets in beaten raccoon paths and in small drains in the marsh.

Live trapping was begun first because it was thought that non-selective steel trapping might be objectionable to the landowners. When objections were not forthcoming, both kinds of trapping were carried out.

Large portions of this marsh were extremely difficult to cover on foot but during infrequent "freeze ups" the marsh was covered and muskrat houses and standing tree stumps were searched for raccoons.

Den trees near the marsh were inspected for use by raccoons.

## Findings

Trapping appeared to be most successful from late November through January, except during periods of excessively low temperatures. At that time raccoons were not very active.

It was orginally intended that the effectiveness of raccoon control be measured by the changes of muskrat yields reported by trappers as compared to areas where raccoon control was not attempted. Beginning in 1950 the rapid decrease in raccoons throughout the area of infestation prevented such a comparison. Therefore, relative abundance of raccoon signs before and after trapping was the only comparison that could be made.

Box traps accounted for only 10 out of 45 raccoons removed from the study area. Of the ten, two were baited by grapes, three by fish, four by persimmon, and one by dried corn on the cob. Turtles, rabbits, song birds, opossums, skunks, woodchucks, rats, grey squirrels, and house cats were caught many times, further reducing the efficiency of the traps for catching raccoons.

Steel traps accounted for 31 of the raccoons caught by project personnel. Underwater sets proved most effective. Although baits were tried in conjunction with the traps, they were not considered as adding materially to their efficiency. Rats, skunks, muskrats, rabbits, woodchucks, dogs, weasels, grey foxes, a Coopers hawk, and a song bird were caught during the operation. After two or three weeks of trapping, raccoon signs diminished rapidly in the area covered by the trap line.

During a short period when the marsh was frozen, checks on raccoon occupying muskrat houses yielded four adult raccoons.

Although a few likely looking den trees were scouted, this method produced no confirmed raccoon kills. Several of these dens were either subjected to nicotine bombs, or had flares dropped in them without evidence of raccoons being noted.

## Conclusions

As a means of obtaining local control of marsh raccoon, the #2 steel trap was fairly effective when handled by the average trapper, reducing the numbers of raccoon rapidly where it was very abundant on the study area. Live trapping was not a practical control measure.

A line of one or two dozen #2 steel traps run two weeks prior to the muskrat trapping season or during the muskrat trapping season would probably materially reduce the damage done by raccoons during periods of their abundance. Locally, raccoon hides and meats in 1950 brought from $1.00 to $2.00 apiece, a price sufficient in itself to make their trapping a break-even proposition.

Although not adequately tested, intensive coverage of the marsh to remove raccoons from muskrat houses holds some promise. The unreliability of "freeze ups" detracts from this method except in those marshes readily accessible during the winter.

Because raccoon control by trapping can be carried on just prior to and in conjunction with muskrat trapping, it is logical that such control is the problem of the muskrat trapper on his own marsh.

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